

The Hidden Skill Gap Nobody Wants to Talk About

Why young adults are struggling on the labour market– and how we failed them.



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Right now, there are 30 students in my class. Most of them are over 18 and have finished school. They are supposed to be ready to join the workforce, and my job is to get them hired within a year. But before we can work on their resumes, practice job interviews, or review math, we have to learn something else entirely: core skills that everybody missed.

Finishing School Does Not Mean That You Learnt Something

When we think about students finishing school, we assume they are ready for work. We think they know how to read and write, can do basic arithmetic, and are somewhat self-reliant. We are wrong. A surprisingly large number of my

students can not clear this bar (yet).

But there is another, much more important, hidden skill gap. The big problem isn't hard skills. What young people lack are very basic skills, which in turn affect their ability to improve all other skills.

- **Basic reliability:** Showing up on time and properly reading a timetable.
- **Workplace etiquette:** Writing a professional email to request time off or submitting sick notices promptly.
- **Focus & preparation:** Disconnecting from a phone during work hours and ensuring you have the necessary tools for a task.
- **Self-advocacy:** Knowing how to organise paperwork and asking for help when stuck.

If you want to understand the scale of the problem, let me give you a concrete example. Before my current position, I was a math teacher at a school. In grade 9, I often conducted routine utensil checks: *Do my students have a ruler? A working calculator? A pencil? Checkered paper?* Especially in recent years, at least half of the class had forgotten to bring at least one necessary utensil to school every time I did these checks. It was not a socioeconomic issue, either. I was working at a private school in a wealthy area just outside of Berlin.

I do not just want to complain about it, but I think we need to take this issue seriously.

Their Chances of Success Diminish Radically

Here is the uncomfortable truth: if a student spends their adolescence without learning to pack a pencil, they become an adult who shows up to a job unprepared to work. Where there used to be maybe two or three students who struggled with this, the rate is now at least 20 to 30% in any given class. I know because my employer also provides employment coaching at public schools.

Lacking those basics is the biggest impediment to my students succeeding in their quest to secure a job or an apprenticeship. Employers do not fire entry-level workers over bad math. They fire them, or refuse to hire them, because they miss shifts, ignore emails, or cannot detach from their phones.

Employers do not have the time or resources to teach those basics. And in my opinion, they should not have to. An employer is fully within their rights to expect an adult hire to show up on time, stay focused, and complete tasks with basic due diligence.

But remember, most of my students are already adults. They spent between nine and thirteen years in formal education and went through their entire adolescence without acquiring these habits. This means we, as a society, have failed them. Collectively. We cannot just blame the schools, the parents, or the youngsters themselves. That does not solve the issue. Let us acknowledge that we failed them, and that we all played a role in this.

Now What?

Okay, we can analyse ourselves to death about where we went wrong.

- Did we fail to rein in social media?
- Did we lean too hard into helicopter parenting?
- Did we focus so much on standardised test scores that we forgot about the basic process of learning?
- Did we expect too little – or demand too much of the wrong things?

It is likely a combination of all of it, in my opinion. But endlessly debating root causes will not help the 30 adults sitting in my classroom tomorrow morning. Every one of them is hoping my colleagues and I can help them find their footing in a competitive job market. If they lack these core competencies, we have to teach them. It is never too late.

To do that, we must meet them where they are. We have to accept that nobody ever showed them how to compose a professional email, manage a personal calendar, or map out a reliable commute.

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This has become our primary focus as educators.

Yes, they will still practice math and refine their resumes. But without foundational executive habits, none of those hard skills will save them in the workplace.

Building a curriculum around these basic competencies does not require us to lower our standards. It forces us to reshape our priorities. If we want young adults to succeed, we have to stop assuming they already know how to operate and start giving them the explicit tools to become functional adults. We are currently building and refining this curriculum, and I would love your input. **What basic life or workplace habit do you think is most critical to teach explicitly?** [Join the discussion on Medium.](#)